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## **The Male Montessorian: the mattering of gender through pink towering practices**

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to open out investigations in ECEC by working beyond anthropocentric accounts of gender. Drawing upon feminist new materialist philosophies we ask whether it might be possible to reach understandings about gender that recognise it as produced through everyday processes and material-affective entanglements. In order to do this, we work with Montessori materials, spaces and practices to grapple with the ways that gender is produced through human-material-semiotic encounters. By focusing on familiar Montessori objects, we follow diffractive lines of enquiry to extend investigations and generate new knowledge about gender in ECEC. This shift in focus allows other accounts about gender to find expression. We argue gender can be understood as more than an exclusively human matter; and we go on to debate what that might mean (i.e. that if gender is fleeting, shifting, and produced within micro-moments there is freedom to break free from narrow framings that fix people, such as ‘the Male Montessorian’, in unhelpful ways). An approach that foregrounds affect and materiality makes a hopeful, generative and expansive contribution to the field.

### **Introduction**

Within the context of the current drive to normalise the work of men in early childhood education and care (ECEC), there has been a tendency to subscribe to reductionist views that seek to essentialise what men bring to the early childhood classroom (DfE, 2017). Feminist poststructuralist perspectives, inspired by the work of Judith Butler (see Robinson 2005, Author 1, 2012) have offered alternative ways to conceptualise gender by arguing that gender should be understood as multiple, shifting, fluid and produced within specific contexts. In this paper, we extend these conceptualisations by asking what other stories get produced when attention is paid to everyday material-discursive entanglements within Montessori early childhood spaces. Inspired by Haraway’s (2011, 2016) SF philosophy we engage in practices of string figuring, ‘passing patterns back and forth, giving and receiving, patterning, holding the unasked-for pattern in one’s hands’ (2011, p.5). By pulling different strings from historical accounts, information from websites, visual images, Montessori literature, news articles, affective memories, personal journals and more, an agencement is created, which produces fresh insights from diffractively reading the various elements through each other. Through practices of diffraction (Haraway, 1994) it becomes possible to think about gender differently and create new and generative stories.

### **Montessori in a ‘market of love’**

Montessori schools have recently made the headlines following a pledge by tech titan, Jeff Bezos, to invest one billion dollars to ‘launch and operate a network of high-quality, full-scholarship, Montessori-inspired preschools in under-served areas’ via Twitter. A further surge of interest in Montessori, particularly in the UK, has been linked to the incidence of the ‘Prince George effect’, in which record numbers of parents flocked to Montessori nurseries in the wake of Prince George’s enrolment in a Montessori pre-school in Norfolk (Hiles, 2018). These examples are suggestive that Montessori currently occupies a strong position in the ECEC market (Penn & Lloyd, 2013). There is a complex and troubling gendered politics that underpins and shapes the childcare market (see Vincent & Ball, 2013). Choosing childcare typically falls to mothers and what informs their decision-making is shaped by social class tastes, prejudices and privileges. As Vincent et al (2008) and later Author 1 (2010, 2012)

exposed, ECEC represents a highly emotional and affective field for both middle-class mothers and the principally working-class, almost exclusively female ECEC workforce (many of whom are also working mothers).

The ‘market in love’ that Vincent & Ball (2013) identified is highly gendered since it is dominated by women (as both consumer and provider) and the work is powerfully inflected with feminised discourses of (maternal) nurturance, love and care (Ailwood, 2008, Author 1, 2012; Page, 2017). The significance of gender and social class in shaping consumer choices has created a complex hierarchy of provision with certain forms of fee-paying, private sector nurseries fairing more favourably than others. Overtime, Montessori has become synonymous with middle-class ideals about a certain sort of childcare, what Montessori has come to symbolise is aesthetically appealing to middle-class tastes and values. Montessori philosophy and practice is aligned to middle-class aspirations to be ‘close to nature’, and a pedagogy that appears to promote mindfulness, self-discovery, and the cultivation of independence, are highly prized middle-class parenting aspirations (Vincent & Ball, 2013). Despite these distinctive middle-class qualities it is interesting to note that the Montessori workforce is also gendered in terms of the composition of its workforce, and the discourses that shape practice, and the rates of pay and employment conditions tend to mirror those of the sector more broadly.

A backward glance reveals that Montessori’s contemporary reputation as a ‘middle-class phenomenon’ (Pound, 1987, p.85), stands in stark contrast to the first Montessori school, the ‘Casa dei Bambini’ (House of Children), in the slums of Rome in 1907. The school emerged from a building project initiated by engineer Edoardo Talamo (Gutek, 2000) who was committed to acquiring and re-modelling run-down, poverty-stricken, overcrowded and unsanitary tenements. His invitation to Maria Montessori to set up day care, was an attempt to solve a practical problem. When the tenants who lived in the remodelled housing complex went to work, their children were left unsupervised, free to wander, a nuisance to the building project i.e. the feckless, feral working-class child. The modern-day metamorphosis of Montessori education is both troubling and fascinating, and worthy of further excavation and questioning which we endeavour to pursue as this paper unfolds.

Whilst tensions shaped by gender and social class in ECEC have been well rehearsed (Skeggs, 2004 Author1, 2006, Colley 2006, Vincent et al, 2008, Cameron 2006) and remain pertinent to contemporary debates, we want to find ways to investigate how materiality, affect and space work together to generate other stories. By placing a focus on the middle-class context of the Montessori classroom our aim is to pursue other ways in which to investigate gendered and gendering practices within ECEC. In order to do this, we turn attention to materialities within the EC classroom and attend to the affects that are generated, and grapple with what this might mean. It is evident that with the passage of time Montessori schools have become reframed and repurposed, but most of the original materials (including blocks) have been retained and replicated. These objects take on a liveliness of their own, they possess what Bennett (2010) terms ‘thing-power’ or vital materialism, by attending to this we endeavour to reach other accounts about how gender comes to matter in ECEC.

### **How matter comes to matter in the Montessori classroom**

Like most early childhood spaces, Montessori classrooms are imbued with material-discursive practices. Even though the language used in Montessori’s writings may not particularly reflect a posthuman glossary, a close reading of her work reveals a

proposition that matter matters within early childhood spaces (Bone, 2017). She directly refers to materials and the environment as the ‘principal agent’ (Montessori, 1997, p.150), ‘the inanimate teacher’ (ibid., p.105), ‘active’ (Montessori, 2008, p.11), ‘informer’ (Montessori, 1997, p.105). This is perhaps because her approach was influenced by the works of monist materialists like Nietzsche (Canakcioglu, 2017; Montessori, 1912). Despite the traces of a materialist ontology, Montessori’s approach is deeply entrenched in humanistic ideals of children being the site for activism and change, which (re-)positions materiality in anthropocentric terms. Montessori materials are distinct and central to the pedagogy, from golden beads, to moveable alphabets to sandpaper globes, the materials emplaced within Montessori classrooms are intended to do certain forms of pedagogical work. We are interested to look beyond human intentionality and ask what else do these materials do? What affects do they generate? What other stories do they make possible?

In this paper we turn attention to a specific Montessori object found within all Montessori classrooms across the globe: the Pink Tower. The tower is so embedded in the Montessori space that it becomes quite possible to overlook its peculiarities and what else it makes possible. We take the block tower seriously and attend to a feminist new materialist exploration that will ask difficult questions of the pink cubes and in doing so will generate more questions about how we might encounter gender (differently) in ECEC.

### **String figuring**

In this paper we work with Haraway’s (2016) SF philosophy, particularly her metaphor and practice of string figuring, that encourages deep thoughtfulness towards worlding processes, that is, how worlds are made and unmade. By weaving together different strings from historical accounts, Montessori literature, feminist theories, early years pedagogy, websites, visual images as well as our own affective memories, knots are formed that materialise worlds in some forms rather than others (Haraway, 1994). We further engage with the concept of ‘pastpresences’ (Haraway, 2008), how pasts and presents constantly converge, collapse and co-construct each other, and how futures are already present, through the practice of string figuring. We therefore pursue a knotted analytical practice, by resisting dualistic categories of nature and culture, masculine and feminine, human and nonhuman. As Haraway makes clear:

‘SF is relentlessly a relational practice rather than a thing. It’s a writing practice, it’s gaming, it’s speculative fabulational practice, a performance, and it always involves many players. It’s collective making-with’ (Haraway, 2018, p.xxxix)

### **Towering practices**

To get at ‘collective making-with’ we turn attention to the Pink Tower which is perhaps one of the most iconic materials in a Montessori classroom, and has a history that predates Montessori. She originally encountered its prototype in psychological laboratories in France, where Italian psychologist Sante de Sanctis, deployed a set of 12 solid wooden cubes differing in 0.5 cm as means to test intelligence (Montessori, 1912; Drummond, 1920). These cubes subsequently found their way into Montessori’s Casa dei Bambini where they were modified to 10 cubes each differing from the next by 1cm and used for materialised refinement of the senses.

The suggested presentation of the Pink Tower has shifted over time although the aim (to sensitise children to differences) remains intact. Both the 1912 and 1948 editions

of *The Montessori Method* stress that the pink cubes are handled by children in the same way:

‘The exercise consists in throwing the blocks, which are pink in colour, down upon a green carpet, and then building them up into a little tower, placing the largest cube as the base, and then placing the others in order of size until the little cube of one centimetre is placed at the top. The little one must each time select, from the blocks scattered upon the green carpet, “the largest” block. This game is most entertaining to the little ones of two years and a half, who, as soon as they have constructed the little tower, tumble it down with little blows of the hand, admiring the pink cubes as they lie scattered upon the green carpet. Then, they begin again the construction, building and destroying a definite number of times.’ (Montessori, 1912, p.174)

The point of difference in contemporary Montessori practice, is that children are encouraged to carry the cubes one-by-one and carefully place them on a mat. Then after building the tower, they are encouraged to take down the cubes one-by-one (MCI, 2013), with the rationale being care for the material (the blocks are made from expensive solid wood and painted with a fragile paint that chips easily – it is through manufacturing processes and then pedagogical directives that a pink block assumes a status of precious vulnerability). This shift in pink towering practices is interesting from a feminist new materialist perspective as it raises questions about what else might be made possible, and what gets shut down. Within Montessori’s original vision the cubes were invited to exercise vital materialism (Bennett, 2010) and the image of the child appears to rest upon boisterous experimentation. By contrast, contemporary block practices seem to demand a different sort of engagement where the blocks take on vulnerability through a perceived need to be nurtured, cared for, and respected. This shift also presents sticky knots surrounding the gendering of such practices. Boisterous deconstruction of the tower might be constructed as a typically masculine engagement whilst more gentle, sensitive, careful placement of cubes that requires calm discipline might be read as bodily regulation through disciplinary technologies of the self (Foucault, 1979). Of course, putting aside adult, anthropocentric pedagogical intentionality, blocks, mat, child-bodies, spacetime-matter (Barad, 2007) intra-act in both predictable and unanticipated ways, as these images of ‘what else’ (Manning, 2016) gets ‘made-with’ (Haraway, 2016) illustrate:



Image 1

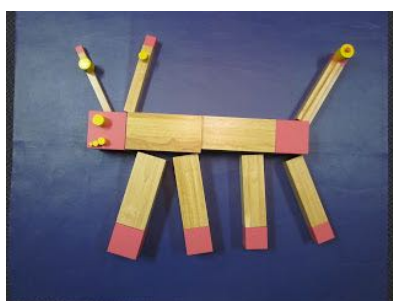


Image 2

<sup>1</sup> Permission to reproduce these images has been granted by The Montessori Jewish Day School, Canada (1) and The Montessori Learning Centre, Dundee (2)

The blocks invite curiosity, playfulness, isolation, collaboration and creative experimentation. Our own engagements with Pink Towering practices produced affective surprises which evoked memories and challenged anthropocentrism and gendered politics (which we go on to explore later in this paper)

### **The ‘image of the child’**

For now, though we want to stress that the ‘image’ of the child (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011) has profound implications for the ways in which we make sense of their (and our) place within the world, their capabilities and our interactions with them. Dwelling upon how particular images of the child come about, are sustained or superseded by others, dependent upon time and context, is important (see Dahlberg et al., 1999; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1990). Montessori’s image of the child was founded upon (1949, p.3) ‘immense riches that lay hidden...in the child’ that find expression through the child’s interaction with a favourable environment in nonlinear, complex ways (Montessori, 2007). The practice of Reggio Emilia further extends this conceptualisation by portraying the child as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture (Rinaldi, 2006), thereby de-centering the child, to see them existing contextually through relations with others (Dahlberg, 1999). Whilst these images of the child are well established in much ECEC practice they are disrupted by other, competing images.

The rise of neoliberalism in capitalist societies has witnessed a particular image of the child, one framed by human capital theories and a concern for developmental progress and ultimately the future contribution a child will make to the labour market (Dahlberg et al., 1999). In *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013) children are framed by masculinist discourses that construct them as competitors in the global economic race. Such a framing insists upon an apparatus to ensure the image of the child (as future worthy citizen) can be realised. This takes the form of assessment, measurement, standardisation and accountability through inspection regimes and quality assurance mechanisms. Demands for this image of the child are tangibly encountered in all ECEC settings, Montessori schools included. Neoliberalism characterised by competitive individualism has been critiqued by feminists for the ways in which it undermines ECEC philosophies and practices (e.g. Cannella, 2007). Taking the Pink Tower as a materialdiscursive example, it is interesting to note how policy discourses materialise and transform how it behaves, the work that it does, and the affects that it generates. In contemporary Montessori practice the pink tower has materialised as a measurement tool; the educator now assesses block play against various pre-determined milestones within the *Development Matters* curriculum framework and so determines developmental progress and school readiness (DfE, 2014). It becomes clear that what the tower does is inflected and shaped by the political imperatives and curriculum objectives of the day. For the ‘Male Montessorian’ encountering these competing discourses and navigating the cultural politics that stick to material objects (Ahmed, 2004) is disquieting. Our intention is to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) presented by such sticky knots, by attending to the affective work that everyday materials do in the production of practices and ideas about gender in the Montessori classroom we hope to contribute to on-going debates about the relationality of the image of the child.

### **String figuring pink cubes**

Taking matter seriously is central to feminist new materialist inquiry (Taylor & Iverson, 2013; Author 1, 2019). We take the pink tower as something to think with in

order that we might generate other stories about the ECEC workforce. A recent visit to the MCI reveals materials within Montessori classrooms to be distinctive and specific. Montessori spaces have a recognisable rhythm, flow and uniformity precisely because the materials are simple, uncluttered, smooth and ‘close to nature’ (Montessori, 1966). A Montessori classroom is intended to provide a calm environment which is in large part attained through ordered neatness of the materials. The distinctive hue of a Montessori classroom is the soft blonde of beechwood. Following Manning (2016) we are concerned to ask *what else* is unfolding within the space? *What else* do these orderly materials make possible? What intensities, flows and affects do they activate?



Image 3: BlondeBeechWood Assemblage

The solid blonde beechwood used in the manufacture of the Pink Tower possesses a low-defect probability according to a Senior Manager at Nienhuis, the Dutch manufacturers of Montessori furniture and materials for over a century:

‘We use beechwood because in general this wood is ‘error free’ which makes it a very good raw material to let the child concentrate on the learning objective instead of the irregularities in the wood.’

(personal email correspondence<sup>1</sup>)

A concern with the irregularities in wood gives pause for thought and complicates ‘close to nature’ materialdiscursive practices within the Montessori classroom. Beech wood is derived from the European tree *Fagus sylvatica*, and is typically pale cream in colour, with straight grain textures. It is hard, odourless, wear-resistant, and economical (The Wood Database, 2018). Referred to as the ‘mother of the woods’ (Recknagel, 1913, p.135) this German beechwood finds its way into the classroom via container ships to Sri Lanka where it is ‘made with care’ by Sri Lankan workers (Neinhus, 2019). Haraway’s practice of tentacular thinking urges us to wonder at what the wood is, where it goes and what it does along fractured pathways to its eventual destination in Montessori classrooms. What gendered politics shape and manifest through the design, production and manufacture of these wooden materials? The pink *fagus sylvatica* cube generates multiple other stories, stories of globalisation,

capitalism and local labour, alongside sustainable foresting practices and adherence to ISO14001 (Environmental Management System Standards) and EN71-3 (European Safety and Quality Standards) (Sheriffdeen, 2018). The production of these pink bricks incites deep thoughtfulness (Haraway, 2016) as other accounts of labour, childhood and ethical response-abilities and worldly entanglements are materialised.

### **Pink matter matters**

“The colour pink we use has changed a bit from the past because we had to change from cellulose paint to two-component paint. After that the colour never changed for the Nienhuis product anymore. Nienhuis has always chosen a much stronger and brighter pink to entice activity.”

(Senior Manager at Nienhuis, personal correspondence)

The pinkness of the cube cannot be left unaddressed. Pink has long troubled feminist scholars and activists, so it is curious to us that the pinkness of the Montessori tower has been spared feminist critique. A feminist new materialist approach to pink though invites us to go beyond critique and to be receptive to the creative, extraordinary manifestations of gender through pinkification practices, and exercise a commitment to unsettle and problematise injustices, instrumentalisations and inequalities. Braidotti’s (2012) invitation to bring critique and creativity together has the potential to offer us richer and more expansive ways to encounter pink. Nienhuis’ decision to brighten the pinkness ‘to entice activity’ provokes us to ponder upon the capacity of colour to entice, and further invites us to consider specifically the work that pink does.

The pinkification of contemporary girlhood has been extensively debated and problematised by feminist scholars (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 2012) for the pressure it places upon girls to conform to narrow gender stereotypes, underestimate their capabilities, and for the negative implications it will have upon their future life trajectories. These debates have become more nuanced and complex overtime (see Robinson, 2013; Lyttleton-Smith & Robinson, 2019). Post-feminists stress that childhood entanglements with pinkification practices are complex, multi-layered, gendered, classed and raced, and they mutate across time and space. Kearney (2015) notes that the pink-sparklification of girlhood has grown exponentially; and actively shapes contemporary childhoods in myriad ways. Pinkification practices have the capacity to affectively move us, aside from the significations of pink in contemporary childhoods, as materialised figuration, pinkification practices generate multiple affective responses.

Colour as a signifier of gender has a complex and inconsistent history, trawling through archives provides evidence that at various points throughout Western history pink was socially constructed a masculine colour. However, there are other instances where it was more readily associated with femininity (Garnier, 1823; Ladies’ Home Journal, 1889). It appears that the intense pinkification of contemporary girlhood first emerged during the 1950s (Paoletti, 1997) and with the rise of capitalist consumerism has found more pronounced expression over recent decades. Pinkification does not only affect girls, it works to create, sustain and exacerbate heteronormative binaries and to marginalise gender non-conformity (including LGBT+ early years educators). Pink does important regulatory work in early childhood so attending to the significance of pink’s capacity to ‘entice activity’, especially that which is unintended or unanticipated presents us with much to contemplate.



The political debates surrounding pink are complex, whilst some do not regard it to present a concern, others are deeply troubled. Campaigns such as PinkStinks (2008) capture parent-activist convictions to challenge and eradicate gender-coding by exposing its ill-effects on children. Yet others, (namely post-feminists or third wave feminists) have re-appropriated pink as a signifier for women's empowerment (e.g. GirlBoss, 2017; PussyHat Project, 2016; Pink Ribbon Foundation, 2018). Through practices of reclamation and reconfiguration, pink has been (re)materialised as a powerful feminist statement against the alt-right, patriarchy and capitalism.

### **Pussyhat activism**

In 2017, in response to the inauguration of the US President, hundreds of thousands of women across the world took to the streets in protest at Trump's flagrant sexist and misogynist rhetoric. Aerial views of urban streets were alive with a swollen sea of knitted pink wool, ebbing and flowing in protest. Magenta, cerise, bubble gum, fuchsia, ballet slipper, salmon; pink pussyhats in multiple shades of rage. The pink woollen sea of feminist activism captured and mobilised a global assemblage of material-affective-semiotic rage. Bennett (2010) writes of the vital materialism that material objects emit, the 'thing-power' of the pussyhat unsettled and reconfigured the work that pink can do, it made the protest hyper visible and undertook important feminist work:

“The more we are seen, the more we are heard. Let's come together to support women's rights in a creative and impactful way.”

(Pussyhat Project, 2016).

The materialised political activism that the pink hat made possible is precisely the sort of world-making practice that Haraway (2016) encourages. It is through mundane, unremarkable, everyday practices such as plaiting, knitting and felting that feminists can create opportunities to reclaim and reinvent playfully serious protest and so work towards more liveable worlds. Montessori classrooms, replete with endless materialities and doing practices might offer unexplored opportunities for both children and staff to explore *what else*.

### **Pink Tower hauntologies**

Staying with the trouble that pink presents urged us to visit the Montessori teacher training centre in North-west London. For Author 2, it was going back to the familiar as a Montessori educator and trainer. For Author 1, it was an opportunity to encounter Montessori materials, spaces and philosophy as a corporeal, multisensory, affective event. We spent several hours touring the building and meeting staff, we were informed about exciting developments including the success of the bursary scheme designed to attract more male trainees (Nurseryworld, 2016) to the Montessori method, and the ongoing commitments to addressing gender issues. We were then introduced to the materials – including of course, the Pink Tower. For both of us the pink tower did important work and produced multiple affective charges that pushed our thinkingfeelingdoing (Manning, 2016) about gender in early childhood contexts in new directions.

*‘begin again...building and destroying a definite number of times.’*



Image 4: MontessoriMaleHauntingMemories Assemblage

### *Again*

As I close my eyes and carefully place the cubes one on top of the other, I am haunted by a memory that Pink Towering practices evokes. As I go about setting up the outdoor space the pink tower presents me with a disquieting sense of injustice. I am charged with preparing the outdoor space at this pack away Montessori setting. I sense a burden of unfairness at being solely in charge of the outdoors which involves being out in the elements, lifting heavy equipment, walking back and forth, again and again, from a wooden storage shed with various materials, scanning the ground for sharp objects and fox faeces. Knowing that I will then be required to repeat the process, again, when the time comes to packing it all back into the shed at the end of the day. This is not the first time, this is not new, this is the norm...again and again, this has been the case in all the settings I have worked over the past 10 years. A nervous anxiety sweeps over me as I am reminded of the absentpresence of the Senior Leadership Team. Although they are not visible, I feel eyes upon me, again: attention to detail, the right way, outdoors must be set up just-so, efficiency is key, there is limited time to dwell upon the materials. The pink cubes demand specific attention, along with brown prisms they must be set up in a large braided storage basket, alongside a relatively small red mat. The red mat provides boundaries for pink cube-brown prism constructions. Teachers remind children to construct within this limited space. But the pink cube-brown prism in the garden was seldom used by children. On the contrary, pink cubes were mostly in demand indoors.

Jones et al. (2012, p.51) refer to the affective potential of objects ‘to disturb and offend as well as delight and comfort’. Author 1’s (2019a) work exploring the ‘doings’ of glitter exemplifies the unanticipated adventures quotidian objects take us on. The cubes-mat-prisms-basket-outdoor assemblage had become an everyday occurrence at this pre-school, however, following Haraway’s (2016) invitation to be curiously provoked by the familiar, and resisting the urge to reduce it to ‘dumb matter’, allows possibilities for ideas about gender to manifest differently. This haunting experience provided a moment of heightened affect, as feelings of discomfort, of being heavily regulated emerged through corporeal intra-action with the pink cubes and the red mat, again. The baric experience of carrying the pink cubes, carrying heavy equipment back and forth from the shed, and the territorialising

effect of the red mat evoked affective memories of regulated ways that gender is produced through seemingly insignificant, routine events. Hegemonic framings of the ‘unique benefits men bring’ to early years, particularly views that essentialise male bodies as physically more capable, stronger and active are deeply entangled in this material-semiotic event. The again-ness of this event, the familiarity and readiness with which gender manifests through routine tasks and everyday habits is striking as the pink blocks are encountered again, albeit differently when we attend to ‘what else’.

*‘tumble it down with little blows of the hand, admiring the pink cubes as they lie scattered ...’*

I am invited to select a mat, to set it on the floor, to set myself on the floor,  
to deconstruct the pink tower, bringing each cube calmly, gently, carefully to  
occupy spaces on the mat.

I am then shown how to build a tower: neatly, calmly, correctly.  
Then it is my turn.

As I begin to select the cubes and place them one-by-one on top of each other  
I am caught up in the rhythm, the repetition, the precision and care that is  
required.

But something else is triggered, physical discomfort at sitting on my haunches  
(a still tender but long since repaired broken ankle is protesting against the  
pink towering practices).

With the tower nearly complete, I wonder what if? disrupt, resist,  
place the last three blocks out of sequence.

The pink towering practices incite naughtiness, subversion, resistance:  
‘Why are they pink?’  
‘What have you built?’

‘A huge crane, a male construction worker is at the top in the control tower’  
‘What would you like to do with it now?’

‘Knock it down!’  
‘That wouldn’t be kind, that would damage the paint’

Admonished, shameful, heroic, defiant.

What else?

The urge to knock it down

Other pastpresent towering practices

Jenga, tap-tap, tentative prod, tumbling, collapsing

Twin towers

Child-height cardboard towering practices, tiptoed determination, fathoming,  
concentrating, emplacing...

Then...ecstasy, running, smashing, blocks propelled across the room,  
laughter, repetition,

“Again, again mummy, again!”

Inexpensive cardboard blocks, two childhoods and then more

Evoking elation, ecstasy, quick thrills.

Cognition, fine-motor skills, mathematical reasoning

Discomfort and joy

What do blocks make possible?

What else?

**Pink matter matters (again)**

Pinkification practices can be read through hauntological bodily re-encounters with towering practices via myriad early childhood encounters – undertaking these diffractive moves presents some interesting points of departure. The introduction of the pink tower within Montessori classrooms would have been around the time when pink was more readily associated with masculinity, which is further compounded when its connections to mathematical reasoning and construction are considered. The pinkness of the towers and the affective work they do is infused by the discursive contexts in which they are situated – pinking practices materially-discursively generate embodied affects that shift our understandings in important ways. The pinkification of girlhood finds its way into Montessori classrooms, entrenched ideas about male workers also find expression, in much the same ways that they do in all other ECEC contexts. But so too do the counter discourses and practices that are taken up and exercised by (feminist) parents and gender aware practitioners (Author 1, 2012; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2016). When the discursive and the material are brought together in this way it becomes possible to conceptualise gender as produced through material-semiotic-affective entanglements that unfold in everyday routines and practices.

### **(In-)conclusion**

Our attention to the pink tower, pinkification practices and *what else* this produces has taken multiple, unanticipated directions through our game of string-figuring. It has raised as many questions as it sought to address. We have not arrived at a neat set of conclusions about how to address gender inequalities in pedagogical practices and workforce formation. But by attending to a close examination of pink towering practices our investigations have been broadened and deepened to create opportunities to dwell on the ways in which gender is produced through material-affective-semiotic moments. It is produced, sensed and reconfigured with each intra-action. Bringing critique and creativity together is important for the field of ECE and for understanding how gender comes to matter through the routine everyday. Following Barad (2007) we stress that ‘the smallest cuts matter’.

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<sup>i</sup> Permission was granted to quote from the email correspondence.